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Reuel H. Sylvester

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COURSE CONTENT AND OBJECTIVES

REUEL H. SYLVESTER

Comparisons of facts and principles taught in introductory courses in psychology in various colleges, reveal wide differences and extremes. Comparisons of various text books for such courses reveal a wide variety of subject matter. Students who complete introductory psychology in one school, might take a corresponding course in another with very little duplication. We lack standards and objectives.

Some teachers of psychology improve their courses from year to year, by omitting non-essentials, and by molding the subject matter into a solid, vital, integrated whole. The majority of teachers fail to improve their courses except by haphazard changes.

In my own efforts, I get substantial help by looking back to the work of three teachers whom I knew a quarter of a century ago. In the years, 1907 and 1908, I was a student in Professor Seashore's introductory course at the State University of Iowa and also had some inspiring contacts with corresponding courses given by Professor Betts at Cornell College and Professor Richardson of Drake University. From my note books written at that time, and from my memory, I now conclude that their courses were better unified and better standardized than ours are at present. They were fortunate, at that time, in being unhampered by controversies that arose soon afterwards over the Binet tests, behaviorism, Freud, and other plaguing problems.

I have secured further information and evaluation of those three courses recently, by talking with students who took them. There are in Iowa, many alumni of Cornell, Drake, and the University of Iowa, who can give splendid material from what they recall of the subject matter, of the points of view, and of the impression of psychology as taught at that time. It would be a workable and information-yielding field of research for graduate students.

Many teachers of today would do well to emulate teachers of twenty-five years ago. The accuracy of detail as given by Seashore from year to year in his heavy, solid course, can hardly be surpassed. Professor Richardson excelled in brilliance, in thought-challenging, interest-inspiring freshness. Her recitation was a

splendid example of a teacher's exposition of textbooks. Having been one of that inspired group of research students, under Angell, she excelled in making his textbook meaningful to her students.

One remembers Betts' course most because of his emphasis on students themselves, on their mental growth into the subject and on the molding of their beliefs and modes of thinking, into what he believed would help them most to become capable men and women. Betts taught *students*, not subject matter or books.

All of these teachers were scientifically sound to the "nth" degree. Many of us psychology teachers of today can profit by the comparison of our teaching with the purely scientific, clear presentation of those teachers.

If I were to indicate one unfavorable impression of each of the three, I should say that Seashore's lectures lacked the freshness that comes from daily preparation. Having put the course into a printed syllabus, he used that and the same notes, for several years, scarcely thinking of the lecture from one year to the next. Professor Betts was inclined to over-emphasize the topics in which he had a special and personal interest. Professor Richardson was inclined to multiply illustrations and sometimes to border on the sensational.

All three had difficulty in keeping free from faculty psychology. Each took pains to explain clearly, the fallacy of faculty psychology, but each occasionally lapsed into expounding from the old faculty point of view.

Twenty-five years ago, there was the same uncertainty as today, concerning the inclusion of the elements of neurology as a basis for psychology. Authorities are still in disagreement.

Finally, we find that then as now, the courses would have been made much more valuable for beginning students by reduction of subject matter to minimum essentials. Then, as today, teachers failed to realize that a few facts and views, thoroughly fixed in mind, are of more constructive value than a greater mass of loosely organized material. We still fail to simplify and to unify the essentials of elementary psychology.

DES MOINES, IOWA.